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Cuban Troops Are Reported In Nicaragua

Alarming intelligence reports out of Nicaragua warn that Fidel Castro may already have sent Cuban troops to help the Sandinista regime fight U.S.-backed rebels there. One report put the number of Cuban troops at 1,000; another estimated 2,000.

If these reports turn out to be accurate, the Cuban military buildup in Nicaragua could give the Sandinistas the edge they need to crush the guerrillas of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force.

This much is known about Cuban strength in Nicaragua: there are at least 5,000 civilian advisers and 1,500 military and security advisers.

But there are also unconfirmed intelligence reports that a substantial Cuban military force arrived in Nicaragua two weeks ago, headed for the key town of Ocotal.

If true, this development could lead the Reagan administration to beef up its aid to the "contras," as the rebels fighting the Sandinistas call themselves. The war then would escalate dangerously.

I sent my associate Jon Lee Anderson to Central America for a

firsthand look. He spent a week in Nicaragua with a task force of 165 *contras* and went along on an ambush directed at the Sandinista militia.

He picked up some evidence, impossible to confirm independently, of a Cuban presence in the combat zone of northern Nicaragua.

One rebel group commander, who calls himself Comandante Sereno, said his men had killed two Cubans carrying Soviet-made AK47 submachine guns and "some strange machines" that turned out to be television cameras.

"I didn't know what the contraptions were," Sereno recalled. "I was afraid they might be bombs. I fiddled with one until a green light came on. It scared me, so I sprayed them with my machine gun." The green light was the camera's "on" signal.

How did he know they were Cubans? They were obviously not Nicaraguans, Sereno said. They were tall, black and bearded.

Sereno said he had fought with Cubans when he was with the legendary Commander Zero—Eden Pastora—during the Sandinistas' revolution against Anastasio Somoza's national guard in 1979.

Futhermore, Sereno said, "Before the ambush we could hear them talking, and they had Cuban accents." The two cameramen, presumably taping the action for Cuban and

Sandinista television, had made the mistake of carrying arms for protection.

Another incident involved a squad leader nicknamed the "Greek." He was pointed out as "the man who killed the Cuban lady doctor."

"She was a doctor at the government hospital in Ocotal," a guerrilla said. "She treated me once."

Another rebel said she was known as "the fat lady," and added: "But she wasn't just a doctor. She carried a gun."

The Cuban woman was riding in a Jeep that was part of a Sandinista convoy ambushed by the rebels. When the ambush started, she yelled at the guerrillas: "Dogs of Reagan! You will all die!"

The Greek said he lobbed an RPG7 (rocket-propelled grenade) at the Jeep. It was a direct hit.

The Cuban connection is a major worry for the young *contras*. They've heard rumors that Castro has already sent missiles to the Sandinistas, and a "regiment" to reinforce the garrison at Ocotal.

At present, the rebels said, they are doing well against the militia because it is largely made up of "cannon fodder," untrained peasants forced into service by the Sandinistas.

"But if the Cubans come in, things will be more difficult for us," a rebel leader acknowledged.